Beyond Conventions?

Agency and Interaction.

Annie Abrahams June 2023
Symposium Cyberperformance: Artistic and Pedagogical Practices,
29 – 30 June, Gambelas Campus, University of Algarve.

Thank you for your invitation! I am happy to be with you all!

I guess, we all agree that videoconferencing will be a part of our communication system for some time to come, and that this is a good moment to ask: How to continue after Covid?, What happened?, How to avoid all the things that went wrong?, What attitude to take?

In this talk I will first give you a short introduction to what I call online performance and to my own work. Then I'll go into what happened in my art practice during Covid and in its aftermath, before giving some hints for the future.

Cyber originally comes from the ancient Greek word kubernetikos, which means "good at steering or piloting." It morphed in French to cybernetique to mean "the art of governing."

https://www.wmar2news.com/decodedc/cyber-is-everywhere-but-what-does-the-prefix-mean-and-where-did-it-come-from

I noticed you choose the term cyberperformance to point to what we also call cyberformance, online performance, telematic performance or networked performance. All these terms have their own conveniences and issues.

Cyberperformance, for me, puts too much stress on the calculation, computer side of the activity, I don't want online performance to have anything to do with steering, piloting, governing. It shouldn't be manipulative, but open up to stimulate individual development and horizontal power structures in groups and so I don't like using this term. Networked performance was for a long time my favorite term, but most performances, also those not using a computer at all, are somehow indebted to networks, or networked.

For now, I go with online performance.

Visit link https://bram.org/bramtv/flaneur.php - computer should be prepared: authorize non secure content / deactivate page protection in your browser for this page - allow the browser to automatically play the media.

Even my "old" net art works can be considered as online performance pieces. Not only because they only exist as code on a server and have to be called by a visitor, and performed / executed by a machine to exist, but also because most of those pieces are specifically made for what I called the public space of solitude aka the internet. In this space there was a direct author spect-actor interaction possible - the work was thought to be a performance by the author and the machine that needed an active audience -> in my case it was not meant to be an art object but an experience: it was relational art for an unknown other.

Most net artists also wanted to research their "new" ("new" always has to be in

between quotation marks, you will understand later why I insist on this), "new" tools from the inside: What is possible? How do they influence us? How can we counter pre-programmed attitudes, how can we be critical? We were, most of us, utopically dreaming of a beautiful democratic internet and future to which we wanted to contribute.

One the puppet of the Other with Nicolas Frespech, Centre Pompidou, 2007
The Big Kiss with Mark River of MTAA, OTO, New York, 2008

This attitude was brutally countered when the big compagnies, social media, and the data-sucking entered the field. At that moment I also started to get annoyed by the "hype" on so called easy computer collaboration - collaboration is never easy, not in real life and not online, it is different!

https://www.bram.org/confront/sphere/indexeng.html &

https://www.bram.org/toucher/TBK.html

I realized it was important to find ways to dive into what online collaboration could be, could bring us and where it was lacking. After a series of experimentations with panoplie.org; a now extinct online magazine on contemporary art and what the French call the numérique, (2006 - 2008 Breaking Solitude and Double Blind I and II) and two very important key performances *One the puppet of the Other* with Nicolas Frespech and *The Big Kiss* with Mark River I was convinced that these experiments brought out artistic objects in their own right; the performances, videos and images had their place also as independent art objects as long as I treated them like that.

https://bram.org/huisclos/indexang.html

In 2009 I started the series *Huis Clos / No Exit*. About relational dynamics in a dispersed group.
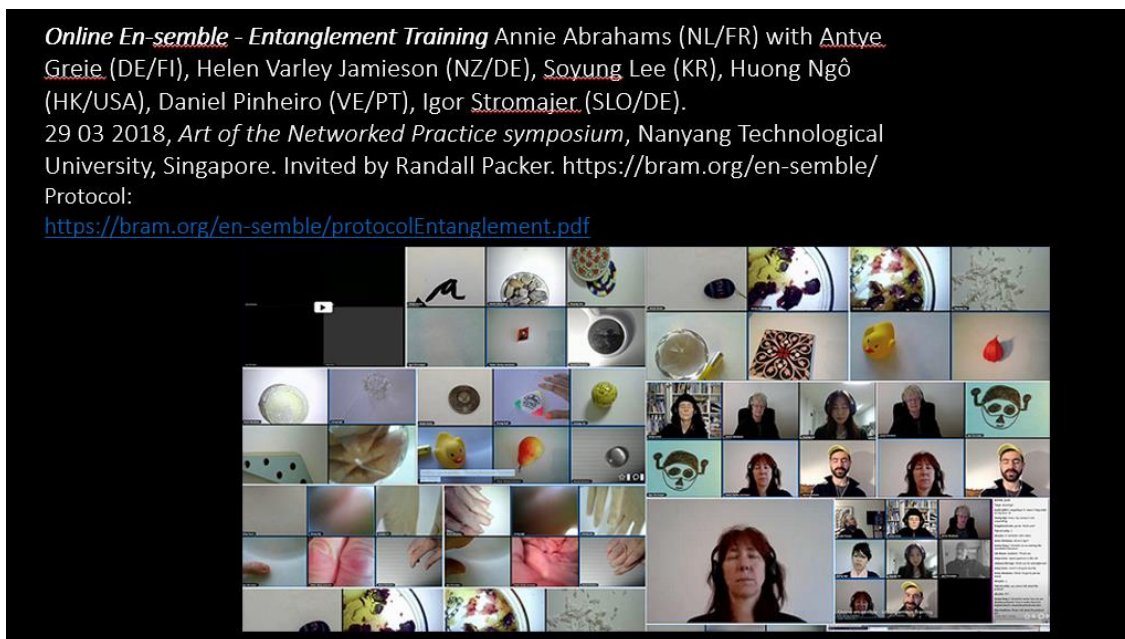
This is how I described the project at that time.

New technologies for collaboration exist and are ameliorated every day. But what about our human capacities? And how are these changed by the same technological means?

Several performers, each in his, her own webcam station, execute a performance protocol. Their images and sounds are combined into a single video projection. From their isolated positions, scattered in space, they share a space of expression and responsibility, a playground, a laboratory.

And these were my research questions:

How do power relations in a group collaborating via the Internet develop? Which models are adequate? How is this collaboration influenced by physical absence, delays in the communication and distortions of the images and sounds? How do groups articulate differences?

Now, 14 years later these questions somehow still have to be answered...

Online En-semble - Entanglement Training Annie Abrahams (NL/FR) with Antye Greie (DE/FI), Helen Varley Jamieson (NZ/DE), Soyung Lee (KR), Huong Ngô (HK/USA), Daniel Pinheiro (VE/PT), Igor Stromajer (SLO/DE). 29 03 2018, *Art of the Networked Practice symposium*, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Invited by Randall Packer. https://bram.org/en-semble/ Protocol: https://bram.org/en-semble/protocolEntanglement.pdf

As you can notice, from the start I used protocols in my online group performances. The carefully scripted protocols (scripts / scenario's) frame a performance.

Page 2 of https://bram.org/en-semble/protocolEntanglement.pdf

Here in the protocol for *Entangement Training* you can see how I combine freedom with triggers that allow for some structure. There is a *game that lasts 2 min, a ceiling, that all fix, then hands for 2 min, 30 sec empty, before someone starts with an object,*

15 min free, till someone decides to end this by showing face, then 5 min silence eyes closed and an alarm that ends it all.

In other performances as for instance *Angry Women* there was just duration and theme, which turned out to be very difficult for some of the participants, a lot of pre contact to clarify the freedom was necessary.

The protocols always must be clear and open at the same time. I think of them as instalments of conditions that can stimulate the emergence of creativity.

They are like what Erin Manning and Brian Massumi of Senselab call "enabling constraints" - **sets of designed constraints that are meant to create specific conditions for creative interaction where something is set to happen, but there is no preconceived notion of exactly what the outcome will be or should be.**

Joel McKim, Of Microperception and Micropolitics, An Interview with Brian Massumi, INFLeXions No. 3, October 2009
http://www.inflexions.org/n3_massumihtml.html

I was never interested in directing the people. I had no preconceived ideas of what the result should be.

I shall read what I wrote in 2011 to students from the Rietveld academy who participated in the performance *Tout va bien* for Studium Generale in Amsterdam.

https://vimeo.com/22335939 jump to 4 min to 7 min. Huis Clos / No Exit - Tout va Bien 2011 https://bram.org/huisclos/toutvabien/indexang.html

There are only rules no norms (as in a psychiatric hospital)
You are in a huis clos, you cannot escape, you are caged in, you are gridded
You are both my research subjects and my co-researchers.
You construct with the others, you share the responsibility for the surface of the performance, for the mosaical image.
Not your sensibility, not your intellect but your capacity to act will be our point of attention.
Our behaviour, our way to interact, to be together is what we will show; there is no priority for either expression or thought, both will serve the "geste".
Nothing spectacular, ordinary interactions, difficult to control because of the mirrored movements in the webcam image, because of delays, interruptions etc.
Nothing is what it seems (co-construction kissing is drawing with the tongue, do you know what I mean?).
No time to control the mirror image of yourself, no time to reflect on its impact on you, so, something will escape, something that you wouldn't show under normal circumstances. You will reveal. Something will be trapped.

My performances are like experiments that allow observation of collaborative behaviour and self-organisation.

Trapped to Reveal https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/18236/18237 and *CyPosium - The Book*, Annie Abrahams, Helen Varley Jamieson (Eds), ISBN 9781291988925. Linkeditions & La Panacée, Montpellier.

https://www.academia.edu/40052680/Learn_together_what_it_means_to_be_connected

As I said in 2011 in an interview Maria Chatzichristodoulou conducted with me and cited in an article in the Journal of Artistic Research:

... In my art I often act as a scientist. My work is experimental, in the sense that my performances are experiments. I ask a question. Then I create a situation, using formal protocols and rules, that I hope will give an answer to my question. ... I don't want the audience to be immersed in my performances. I want them to be distanced; in fact, I don't want them to be an audience at all, I would prefer to think of them as involved observers. ...

And in 2014 in my article in the book I edited with Helen Varley Jamieson after the cyposium we co-organised with others in 2012

My performances can also be described as test-tubes for closely observing an internet ecology, or as agency art in which behaviour and actions are the aesthetic material.

I always tell the performers before the performance that nothing can go wrong, but for this to be ok, it is important that they are well-prepared. There are always test sessions for them to know the tools they are using, so they can participate equally in the non-hierarchical environment. I also take care they feel at ease with each other and the performance environment with its glitches inconveniences etc. through exercises / trainings and attunements. But we never rehearse. Although they may have tested some parts, they know the exact protocol only a few hours before the actual performance.

In short**, the conditions for, what I called an aesthetics of trust and attention are:**
- Clear constraints that lead to a lot of individual liberty.
- Simple easy to understand protocols.
- Care for a familiarity for all with the technical conditions. (Especially sound

can be tricky)
- No rehearsals, only testing and experiments before.
- Nothing can go wrong as long as the performers take responsibility for the event. From performance workshop with Distant Movements for the Greek ADAF festival 2022.

In *Cyposium the book*, I described cyberformance as a niche, but only 6 years later, when Covid became a worldwide crisis, this changed. Videoconferencing was all over, and a lot of people discovered "the wheel" and presented their "first" online performance. This "the first" was annoying. For instance, Galloway and Rabinowitz with their "Aesthetic Research in Telecommunications," go back to 1975.

As a reaction Helen Varley Jamieson, Suzon Fuks and me produced a video called *"Before the First"*, where we asked long-time online performance artists about their "first" experience with online performance art. They went as far back as 1992 to Paul Sermons *Telematic dreaming*.

At the same time Daniel Pinheiro and me tackled a lack of knowledge about videoconferencing specificities and its demands in *Why is the use of videoconferencing so exhausting? An analysis on the demands"* a video essay for the Journal of Embodied Research.

Video DOI: http://doi.org/10.16995/jer.67 Abrahams, A., Pinheiro, D., Carrasco, M., Zea, D., La Porta, T., de Manuel, A., … Varin, M. (2020). Embodiment and Social

Distancing: Projects. *Journal of Embodied Research*, *3*(2), 4 (27:52). Used in this video essay is a recording of *Distant Feelings* https://bram.org/distantF/

Intimacy is awkward - no overview - you have to scan the screen continuously - interruption(s) - no details, imagination replaces the secondary signs of communication and these have to be processed on usefulness - interruption(s) - we check our own image all the time as if we need a continuous assurance that connexion still exist - all sound is mixed in one sound environment, and so we have to guess where the sound comes from - distraction(s) - interruption(s) - you, me and I, a triangular situation in which we're feeling and watching ourselves and the others ... this is psychologically demanding: our brain needs to process the self as body and as image - interruption(s) - you only see faces in close-up when you are a baby in a cradle or with a lover in bed - there is delay, we are never exactly in the same time/space
All this contributes to an exhaustion because we try to overcome the limitations of artificial environments without taking into account its specificities - interruption(s).

During confinement, I continued working in four projects already started before. *Distant Movements* with Muriel Piqué and Daniel Pinheiro, *Distant Feelings* also with Daniel, *Utterings* with again Daniel and with Curt Cloninger, Nerina Cocchi and Constança Homen Carvalho and *Constallations.ss.sss* with Alix Desaubliaux, Alice Lenay and Pascale Barret.

Distant Movements and *Distant Feelings* became open practices. In 8 weeks, we had 7 sessions of 15 min. for *Distant Feelings*; being together online eyes closed and no talking with unknown others.

Video of confinement session 5 (video is not online), jump to 6 min, to 12 min.

In *Distant Movements* we spend 8 sessions with often unknown participants to develop a recipe / protocol for engaging with others in a bodily connection at a distance.

Distant Movements
https://distantmovements.tumblr.com/

Our *recipe for dancing online with strangers?* always starts with a short introduction to our research in online movement. We say that the session is recorded, and point to the fact that the eye of the webcam makes the online space a public space. We ask the participants to close their eyes to stimulate an inner gaze and a body awareness. Slowness is recommended (but not obligatory) in order to favour the perception of the experience. We ask to try to be aware of the presence of others, even if they are invisible. And also here we stress they can't do anything wrong.

Then we start with an activation of the body through "balancing" with the eyes open, we ask to close the eyes while continuing their movements. And we announce a theme as for instance - breathing - blood flowing - the space of the body - the temperature of the skin - wind, confinement or something else.

During the last 10 minutes we give rare qualitative incentives:
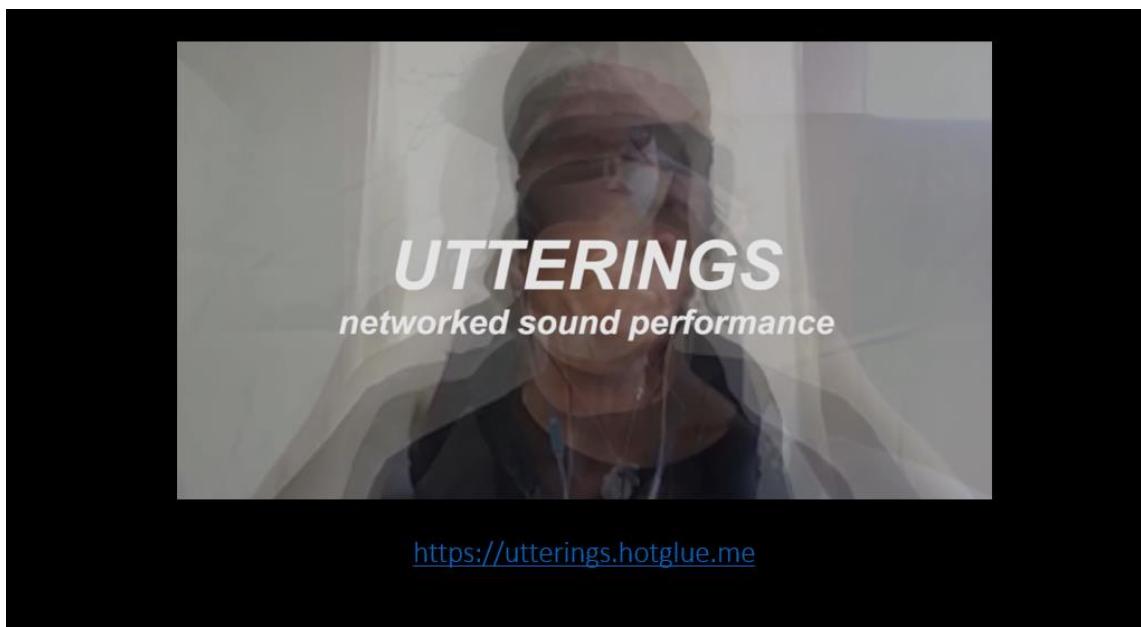
don't forget to breathe

remember to stay aware of your body

your toes move too

think about flexibility

At the end (an alarm rings after 15 min.) we propose to ponder on their feelings for a time after disconnection. We put the recording online so the participants can watch and maybe reconnect with the experience? maybe resonate with it.

The recipe has been used when we were invited to do a workshop and performance for the ADAF festival in Greece

https://utterings.hotglue.me

With *Utterings*, our online performance and research group we did our first public performance at the Audioblast festival in Nantes 2020, when Covid had already installed itself. The group, we also like to call ourselves a band, whose members gather online and, while blindfolded, engage in utterings as communication, started however before in 2019. We wanted to create an on the fly "new" language, a language that forwards attention, trust and feelings, above rationality.

After Nantes we had two self-organised performances, and then some invitations. One for the Network Music Festival and another for the StadtWerkStadt MORE LESS festival in Linz. We were also invited to do three performances for the London based *We're All Bats, Listening Arts Channel* and again three workshops with performances for them in 2021.
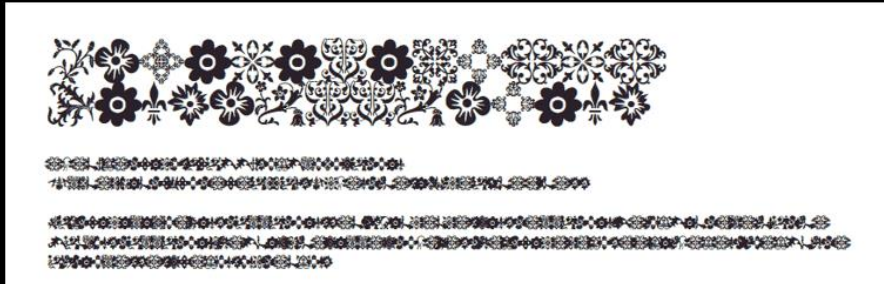
Our band continues their research and lately started experimenting with tone and timbre when in a discussion (on the website there is a transcription) some members expressed a desire to explore also a more "musical" approach. You may have seen our performance *Colliding Interferences* yesterday, where we tried to combine the "new" interest in tone with our original starting point around language and communication. We can talk about it, also with Daniel, after this talk.

Constallations.ss.sss is a different story. It was a nice flowering online project before Covid (started in 2018), but lost its speed after. Was it overexposure? or interests that diverged to more physical art practices? At the end we luckily managed to write a book chapter together for the book *Diffracting New Materialisms*. We still dream of coming together and reconnecting ...

Even though, Constallations.ss.sss is still interesting as a feminist online "collaboration" model for art research. After our first year we wrote a methodology. In short: we use a system of challenges and surprises in sessions prepared and cared for by one, the others follow the challenge and allow themselves to be displaced. We treated very divers subjects from online gaming via bird behaviour and webcam dissecting to working with clay.

Constallations is devoid of a goal and has no predetermined path.
Constallations is what we are when we give up our personal objectives and, when, based on
our own history and skills, we tackle a challenge prepared by one of the group.
Constallations is made of travels through things one doesn't control, of jumps in the void.
Constallations is an exploration full of unexpected discoveries.
Constallations is a learning tool / a practice radically open to everything.
Constallations is a concrete utopia – on a small scale, and temporary, it must be said – but it is,
and so carries a hope for a different society.
It's a perspective.
Constallations is a path, an adventure, a chemistry, a soup that upsets habit and creates links.

With Constallations.ss.sss we often used reariting as a tool

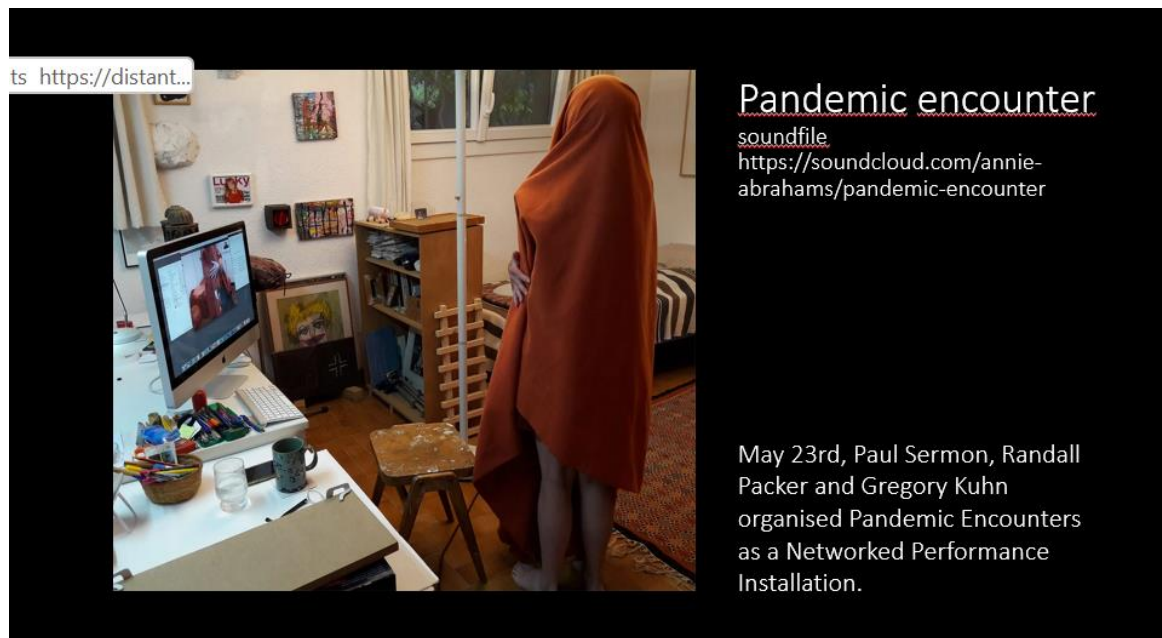https://constallationss.hotglue.me/?OPF and https://youtu.be/Rm6P5YGxrLQ

Reariting is a reading and writing that goes on between several people on one and the same collective digital writing pad. Editing takes place in real time on all screens involved. At the start, participants find a short text on the writing pad. They read this while writing their notes, ideas, reactions, digressions, the ones through the others on this pad. The text serves as a source of inspiration, debate, conflict and inventiveness and will often eventually be erased.

Reariting (licriture) manifests itself as a facilitator for a diffractive, distributed intelligence on-the-fly, creating text and relational patterns that do not depend on canons. It generates creative and unexpected "outcomes". These are, in my opinion, not so much the texts produced, as the "diffractive moments" experienced by the reariters.
https://aabrahams.files.wordpress.com/2019/07/diffractive-1.pdf

Reariting has been derived from https://readingclub.fr.

Besides these existing projects, that were adapted to or got a boost during Covid time there were other Covid related events I participated in. For instance, *Pandemic Encounters* by Paul Sermon, Randall Packer and Gregory Kuhn was organised as a Networked Performance Installation.

The sound file that I used in my performance with Paul later found its way to a real-life exhibition called *Lockdown* in La Trimouile France, to the exhibition *Temps Suspendus* at Plateforme in Paris, and to the online *COVID E-lit exhibition* in May

2021.

This last online exhibition also featured *breathing* by *Utterings*. Our band also organized a panel called *Supra Semiotics* in that year's Electronic Literature Organisation's conference organised completely online.

For at least one year people tried to move all kind of events online. Magdalena, an international network of women artists working in theatre and performance, had a successful first Online Magdalena Festival (2021) (they organized festivals all over the world for 35+ years), where I presented an *Angry Women* workshop for max 12 attendants to prepare two 15 min. performances with these participants.

Some friends and colleagues thought that I would be over solicited, but except some guest workshops in online courses and a short article in one of the national Dutch newspapers De Volkskrant : *The art of online affecting: a crash course,* everything went on as usual (but of course not in my personal life).

However, I am here now and without Covid there would probably not have been this conference ... ... and I had a net art work from 1999 *Moving Paintings* in an online exhibition called *Sans Objet* at the Centre Pompidou in 2021. It was their first online event since ... 20 years? It wouldn't have been if for Corona, corona ... as wouldn't have been the online exhibition on Mozilla Hub *Vous êtes ICI* 2020 organised by Valentin Godard.

I also started to take writing my poetry more seriously and even publishing some.

INTERNET EXPLOREUR (ARCHIVES)
À PROPOS ARCHIVES ARTISTES
MODE NUIT A+ RSS
TYPO SANS-SERIF

Corona Corona Corona

wish I could touch you, dance with you
love you
feel
eel
flee
flying
gone

https://pquod.github.io/InternetExploreur/corona-corona-corona/

And ... and ... A lot happened for all of us and we are changed by it.

There starts to be an interest in how it affected us. Of course, I am just aware of a tiny bit of what has been published:

(Pandemic Exchange 2021 is a book edited by Josephine Bosma with interviews about how the pandemic played out in daily life and affected individual artists and their work in different places in the world.

Jana Horáková, Marika Kupková and Monika Szucsova et al. recently published *The Black Box Book. Archives and Curatorship in the Age of Transformation of Art Institutions* Their publication is the result of the efforts of an international collective of authors to capture the transformation of exhibition institutions and curation during the Covid 19 pandemic, with a focus on the year 2020.

Even more recently the essay *Pandemic Genres: Processing the COVID-19 Pandemic through Electronic Literature*, by Anna Nacher, Søren Bro Pold and Scott Rettberg was published in Hyperriz. It surveys 18 works of electronic literature and digital art initiated in the earliest months of the pandemic that are reflective of the specific conditions and anxieties of the period.

Bianca Mastrominico published, also very recently an interesting article in *Body, Space & Technology 22*. She analyses and discusses digital spectatorship in her online theater piece *Flanker Origami*.)

Pandemic Exchange 2021 edited by Josephine Bosma
https://networkcultures.org/blog/publication/pandemic-exchange-how-artists-experience-the-covid-19-crisis/

The Black Box Book. Archives and Curatorship in the Age of Transformation of Art Institutions, Jana Horáková, Marika Kupková and Monika Szucsova et al.
https://munispace.muni.cz/library/catalog/book/2217

Pandemic Genres: Processing the COVID-19 Pandemic through Electronic Literature, by Anna Nacher, Søren Bro Pold and Scott Rettberg, 2023.
http://hyperrhiz.io/hyperrhiz26/essays/pandemic-genres.html

Active Spectatorship and Co-creation in the Digital Making of Flanker Origami by Mastrominico, B, in *Body, Space & Technology* 22(1),
https://doi.org/10.16995/bst.9737

Also, artists not initially related to the internet discovered and thoroughly researched the "new" conditions.

Nicoline van Harskamp, who is interested in voice and language and who will talk later on today in this symposium, is a good example. She got intrigued by how zoom acts on our speech and her thorough research resulted in her art video *Contagious Speech*, that I strongly recommend watching. In the video we see for instance how after Covid the way we speak in real live conversations changed through the way zoom acts on. Also Zoom cuts the breaths and thus we "got used" to breathless speech to a point where voice-over voices need to learn to talk without breath. Nicoline's work is an excellent example of creative research that leads to works of art.

In general, I am sure we need more of such research projects. We need to know more about what distanced communication does to us and per conséquent also more experiments on how to connect/behave/work and learn together online.

It is important to pay attention to experimental projects as for instance Ian Nesbitt's *Co-listening*. He focuses on transformative listening by freeing participants from the need to respond, and, to listen for understanding rather than agreement.

UpStage; an online venue for live performance where remote performers collaborate in real time using digital media, has been with us for almost 20 years now. It is still an active place for experimentation where online audiences anywhere in the world join events by clicking a link to open the virtual stage in their web browser.

Over all we need to stop acting as if online communication is a replacement for something else. Big groups on zoom might be okay if there are breakout rooms, or if the chat-space is mediated by someone knowledgeable of what is happening, but should mostly be avoided. What is the use of collectively watching someone talk without interaction possibilities?

Every communication tool has its own conditions, possibilities and of course flaws, that we need to get familiar with. We have to accept we can't control everything; we have to accept to live with glitches and interruptions, and we must always find ways to do "with" these.

We need to realize, that liveness doesn't come from being "life" together, but from interaction. We need to foster that by using for instance online tools as collective

writing-pads. We can also try better to find playful protocols, that are clear and easy to apply. We need to give the audience (and the students :)) agency.

Annie Abrahams 30/07/23

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Key note Annie Abrahams 30/07/23 10.30AM